MINISTERIAL DECLARATION ON

ADULT COMMUNITY EDUCATION

MINISTERIAL COUNCIL ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
The Adult Community Education (ACE) sector in Australia is characterised by its dynamism, diversity and responsiveness. As with other sectors of education and training, the ACE sector has evolved rapidly in response to increasing demands by society, government, employers and individuals for a better education and higher levels of skills.


The Declaration puts strong emphasis on achieving community capacity building through community ownership, and on the importance of the ACE sector as a pathway to further education and training for ‘second chance’ learners.

The goals and strategies demonstrate the Ministers’ commitment to the future development of adult community education in Australia and firmly places adult community education as a significant contributor within the continuum of education and training provision in Australia.
n April 1999, Australia’s Education Ministers declared: Australia’s future depends on each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated and just society.

The declaration recognises that economic success is increasingly driven by workforce skills, capabilities and ingenuity. Recent world events have also shown that economic success, political stability and social cohesion are inextricably linked, and are sustained by active and informed citizens.

As the Australian population and its workforce ages, the adult proportion of the population grows and birthrates decline, we cannot rely on young people as the major source of social and economic renewal. Boosting the skills, knowledge, capability and understanding of all people has become a goal for governments in all modern industrial democracies. Achieving this goal represents a significant challenge. The skills and knowledge required in a modern, complex society have changed profoundly since most adults completed their initial education. Literacy in information and communication technology is now required for full participation in all spheres of life and work. Communicating and relating effectively, reasoning, problem solving, and decision making – often in a variety of cultural contexts – are skills that we all will need if we are to enjoy productive and rewarding lives in an educated and just society. Our capacity to innovate and learn will drive our future economic and social progress. However, acquiring basic literacy and numeracy remains the foundation for further learning and for participation in a complex society.

Australia is well placed to meet this challenge. Many Australians actively engage in learning: for personal growth and development; to contribute in new ways to their communities; to support career decisions and aspirations; to work more productively; or simply for a love of learning. They learn both formally and informally and in diverse ways: through education and training institutions; by means of workplace training and personal development programs; via social institutions and community organisations; through the media; and by using information and communications technology. Australia’s levels of adult participation in formal education and training, its media consumption, and its Internet and information/communications technology usage, are amongst the highest in the world.

However, many adults did not acquire the learning essentials when they were young, or they learned in languages other than English. Now they may not value and even fear learning. Over 50 per cent of the adult population do not hold post-school qualifications. Thirty eight per cent of adults aged 45-54 and 49 per cent of adults aged 55-64 did not complete the highest level of schooling. Women who did not complete a full secondary education are far less likely to participate in the labour force than more highly educated women and most men. In an international adult literacy survey, 45 per cent of Australian adults were assessed as not having sufficient levels of literacy to cope with everyday demands of life and work in a complex advanced society and as less likely to
participate in job-related education and training. Levels of educational participation and attainment of Indigenous Australians are the lowest of any group.

A ‘knowledge gap’ separates those adult Australians with high levels of educational attainment who most effectively use our learning resources, from those who least effectively use those resources: people who are poor, have disabilities, have low levels of literacy and numeracy, are from non-English speaking backgrounds, are geographically and socially isolated, and Indigenous Australians. We also face a knowledge gap between younger and many older Australians as more young people are reaching adulthood and entering the workforce with the benefit of educational opportunities and outcomes that were denied to many older Australians. Our capacity to ensure that all citizens lead a ‘productive and rewarding life in an educated and just society’ is diminished by this gap and even more by its growth.

We need innovative and accessible learning solutions, relevant to individual life circumstances and environments that engage those with the greatest learning needs and give them the confidence, skills and desire to continue to learn.

Indeed, all adults need to acquire and maintain the new skills and knowledge required in a modern, complex society and to manage and influence the transitions they face throughout their lives. These transitions are now more complex and for many, more abrupt. Patterns of participation in the workforce are changing: many people hold a range of jobs, often in different locations, throughout their working lives. Others have intermittent and unstable attachments to the workforce or no workforce experience at all. Pathways into and out of the workforce and retirement are diversifying. Family structures and relationships change and evolve. People are living longer and pursuing active healthy retirements, but isolation and loneliness is a growing social problem among older Australians, particularly following the loss or incapacity of spouses and partners.

People are demanding high quality, flexibly delivered and relevant responses from education and training providers that meet the needs of individual learners. Meeting the needs of the broader adult population therefore requires expanded, more diverse and flexibly delivered learning resources and opportunities.

Solutions to these challenges are emerging from communities themselves through adult community education. These solutions – based on partnerships within communities and with government – harness the potential of our community organisations, social and educational institutions and workplaces to create new and innovative learning resources and opportunities. Through the cooperation and
commitment of thousands of staff and volunteers in adult community education, more than half a million Australians acquire new skills and knowledge every year. This collective commitment by staff, volunteers and learners achieves broader outcomes. It increases social participation and cohesion by connecting people within their local communities. It renews community capacity and social capital, and creates environments that promote cross-cultural understanding. It also contributes significantly to local and regional economic development.

There is now increasing recognition at all levels of government in Australia of the principle that government policies and programs should empower communities to create and sustain local and regional responses to social, economic and environmental needs. Under this principle, programs are designed flexibly, involve all relevant government agencies in order to eliminate duplication, and allow local solutions to be negotiated and resourced. Applying this principle to the recognition and provision of adult community education will extend its benefits to many more individuals and communities. It firmly places adult community education as a significant contributor within the continuum of education and training provision in Australia.

The state, territory and Commonwealth Ministers responsible for adult community education have therefore endorsed four goals and a range of strategies to guide the future development of adult community education in Australia. The strategies will be implemented flexibly, depending on circumstances and needs in each state and territory, through new and revised adult community education policies and plans at a state and territory level. Adult and community education will be publicised by each state and territory, describing and highlighting achievements, including progress against the national declaration on ACE and state and territory policies and plans.

The goals

1. Expand and sustain innovative community-based learning models.
2. Raise awareness and understanding of the role and importance of adult community education.
3. Improve the quality of adult community education learning experiences and outcomes.

Achieving these goals is not the responsibility of government alone. The enabling strategies may be adopted by education and training providers, community organisations, employers, industry and other bodies as part of our collective commitment to achieving the objective of ‘each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated and just society’.
Expand and sustain innovative community-based learning models

Expanding and sustaining innovative community-based learning models is the most significant goal in this declaration. To implement the goal, a range of strategies that involve federal, state and local government working in partnership with community organisations and social institutions is required.

Enabling strategies

➔ Support the community to create partnerships with and across federal, state and local governments in developing, negotiating and delivering flexible programs to meet adult learning needs.

➔ Ensure that ACE providers are involved in regional and local development strategies.

➔ Integrate adult community education with other strategies and programs; for example, national reconciliation, rural extension, environment and heritage, healthy ageing and active retirement, accident rehabilitation, crime reduction, corrections education, small business, the arts, mental health, social welfare agencies and employment service providers.

➔ Increase the use of existing educational and other infrastructure by community adult education providers, in particular through opportunities that may emerge in schools as a result of decreasing student numbers.
Goal 2

Raise awareness and understanding of the role and importance of adult community education

International bodies, such as UNESCO and the OECD, governments and major industry and community groups recognise the social and economic importance of all adults learning and acquiring new skills and knowledge. However, market research within the community and industry shows an uneven level of acceptance and recognition of that objective, particularly amongst groups and individuals least likely to engage in further learning but who have the greatest needs. Research also shows that the provision of flexible and accessible community-based adult education is the most attractive option for many disengaged adult learners.

Enabling strategies

➔ Utilise research findings to alter perceptions and communicate the benefits of adult community education to specific community segments, particularly those least likely to engage in learning and to their families and employers.

➔ Demonstrate and celebrate the value and credibility of community-based learning programs to potential learners, businesses, community organisations and government.

➔ Improve the quality and ease of use of guidance and information systems.

➔ Promote successful learners, community and business leaders and schools as advocates and mentors for adult learning, including learning between younger and older Australians.

➔ Increase awareness of, and provide information on, the availability of local learning resources.

➔ Promote the direct and indirect benefits of investment in ACE programs, such as the contributions made by individuals and communities and by highlighting broader social outcomes.

➔ Publicise the range and diversity of adult community education provision by identifying and building networks with agencies that provide community education programs.
Goal 3

Improve the quality of adult community education learning experiences and outcomes

Positive and rewarding learning experiences lead to improved confidence and self-esteem, learning ‘how to learn’ and enhanced employment and career outcomes. These outcomes require high-quality teaching and learning relevant to individual learner needs and circumstances. New definitions of skills, knowledge and competence are evolving and should encompass adult community education experience and outcomes.

As new roles and opportunities emerge, management of adult community education centres will become more complex and demanding. Adult community education staff and volunteers will need to acquire new skills and knowledge to meet current and future challenges.

Outcomes for individuals and communities will also need to be identified and reported in order to measure and assess the unique role of adult community education.

Enabling strategies

➔ Develop broader and more relevant measures of adult learning outcomes for both individuals and communities that encompass social participation, diverse pathways, and the contributions of volunteers and other community agencies.

➔ Ensure that adult community education experiences and outcomes inform emerging definitions of skills, knowledge and competence, and the means by which they are most effectively acquired.

➔ Foster a research culture in ACE and ensure effective exchanges between researchers, adult community educators and policy makers to generate and disseminate new knowledge about successful practice.

➔ Expand and promote learning pathways, particularly between community-based and other education and training providers.

➔ Expand and enhance professional development programs for staff and volunteers in adult community education, including volunteer management.

➔ Strengthen management and governance of adult community education providers.

➔ Create secure and comfortable community-based learning environments for adult learners.
Participation in formal post-secondary education is unevenly distributed. People with lower levels of educational attainment are least likely to participate in further education and training. People with poor experiences at school and with specific learning needs are also less likely to participate in traditional, institution-based programs and may prefer less formal settings. Adult literacy is a major and immediate priority. We must expand innovative and flexible community-based programs and learning opportunities that meet individual learning needs and circumstances.

Enabling strategies

➔ Expand adult literacy, numeracy, and information and communication technology programs to provide the foundations for further learning.

➔ Expand learner centred approaches that build pathways from informal to formal learning and recognise the value of informal learning in building confidence and ‘learning to learn’ skills in disengaged learners.

➔ Develop appropriate costing models and target resources to people with the greatest learning needs.

➔ Ensure that community-based programs recognise and address cultural and linguistic diversity.

➔ Increase the range and flexibility of delivery and assessment options.

➔ Empower and assist learners to negotiate, choose and manage learning pathways and ensure that resources support learner choice.

➔ Provide access to information and telecommunication infrastructure and online learning through community settings.

➔ Work with other agencies to improve and better coordinate support services, including childcare, transport and access for people with disabilities.

➔ Develop and resource strategies for recognition of prior learning, including informal learning.